

Abdel Salam A. El-Koumy

EFFECT OF THE HOLISTIC APPROACH ON THE QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF EAP STUDENTS' WRITING

Abdel Salam Abdel Khalek El-Koumy
Suez Canal University, Egypt

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In response to recent theories in language learning, the holistic approach emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century. The basic principles underlying this approach are: (1) The whole is more than the sum of its parts; (2) Language learning is a social process; (3) Learning is student-centered and process-oriented; (4) Language learning involves relating new information to prior knowledge; (5) Language skills are acquired concurrently and interrelatedly; and (6) Students' errors are signals of progress in language learning. For detailed information about these principles, see Doake (1994), Dudley-Marling (1995), Freeman and Freeman (1994), and Newman and Church (1990).

In light of the above principles, the holistic approach theorists (e.g., Farris, 1989; Lapp and Flood, 1992; Lundsteen, 1989; McDonough and Shaw, 1993) hold that language is unitary. McDonough and Shaw (1993), for example, state that

If we look around us in our daily lives we can see that we rarely use language skills in isolation but in conjunction ...and, even though the classroom is clearly not the same as 'real' life, it could be argued that part of its function is to replicate it. If one of the jobs of the teacher is to make the students 'communicatively competent' in L2, then this will involve more than being able to perform in each of the four skills separately. (pp. 201-202)

The holistic approach theorists also hold that students should be given the opportunity to simultaneously use all language arts (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in contextually meaningful, purposeful, and cooperative activities (Carrasquillo, 1993; Freeman

and Freeman, 1992; Farris and Kaczmariski, 1988; Goodman, 1989). These activities center around topics that build upon students' background knowledge (Edelsky, Altwerger, and Flores, 1991; Freeman and Freeman, 1994). These topics are often selected by the students themselves (Pahl and Monson, 1992).

Advocates of the holistic approach assert that there are many advantages that can be attributed to this approach. One of these advantages is that it builds upon students' experiences and stimulates their interests and imaginations. As Goodman, Watson, and Burke (1987) put it:

In a whole language program, students are encouraged to bring their experiences and their language into the classroom. A great deal of talk takes place about ideas, events, and people that are already of interest to students or have the potential of stimulating their interests and imaginations. (p. 142)

Another advantage of the holistic approach is that it boosts students self-esteem and self-confidence (Freeman and Freeman, 1994; Kaminski, 1991; Weaver, 1990). Still another advantage of this approach is that it "can be highly motivating to students of all ages and backgrounds" (Oxford, 2001, p. 5). A final advantage of the holistic approach is that it can develop students creativity, critical thinking and independence. As Weaver (1994) points out, "Whole language teachers encourage students to think not only critically but creatively, and to engage in learning experiences that foster such independence of thought and expression" (p. 223).

However, opponents of the holistic approach argue that this approach neglects accuracy although many language teaching theorists and researchers agree that accuracy is an essential element in language development (e.g., Eldredge, 1991, 1995; Goldenberg, 1991). A second argument against the holistic approach, according to Freeman and Freeman (1992), is that "it won't be easy to implement, and there will be resistance to many practices consistent with whole language" (p. 9). A third argument against this approach is that it over-estimates FL students' ability to select, regulate, and direct what

they learn. A final argument is that the holistic approach is time-consuming and requires considerable staff development (Danehower, 1993; Sanacore, 1995).

The foregoing makes it difficult for teachers to determine whether the holistic approach is effective with EFL students or not. Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of this approach, as compared to the segregated-skill approach, on the quantity and quality of EFL students' academic writing.

REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

A survey of research related to the problem under investigation revealed that there are conflicting results regarding the impact of the holistic approach on the quantity and quality of students' writing. Roberts (1991) found that the holistic approach improved the quantity and quality of writing produced by first graders. Similarly, Agnew (1995) found that the holistic approach improved the quantity and quality of compositions written by fifth graders. In contrast, Shearer (1992) found that the holistic approach did not improve the quantity or the quality of writing produced by students in grades two through six. Varble (1990) found that the holistic approach improved the quantity, but not the quality of writing produced by second graders.

As indicated above, studies conducted in the area related to this study were limited to L1 writing. Moreover, the subjects in all these studies were elementary school children. This clearly underscores the need for the present study.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

In light of the previously mentioned literature, the hypotheses of the study were stated in the null form as follows:

- (1) There would be no statistically significant differences in the pretest mean scores between the experimental group and the control group on the quantity or the quality of EAP students' writing.
- (2) There would be no statistically significant differences in the posttest mean scores between the experimental group and the

control group on the quantity or the quality of EAP students' writing.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The subjects for the study were 64 graduates enrolled in the Special Diploma in Education at the School of Education in Suez during the second semester of the 2001/2002 academic year. These subjects were randomly divided into two equal groups: an experimental group and a control group. All subjects spent 9 to 12 years learning English as a foreign language. And all ranged between 26-35 years of age.

Materials

The materials for the experimental group centered around theoretical articles and research studies that were drawn by the students themselves from books and journals in the area of curricula and instruction.

The instructional materials for the control group consisted of 12 lessons which centered around academic writing subskills. These subskills included sentence structure, sentence combining, paragraph structure, and the like. All lessons were drawn from Alice Oshima and Ann Hogue, *Writing Academic English* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1991).

Instruments

Two EAP writing tests were used in the study. One was used as a pretest and the other was used as a posttest. Each test required students to write as accurately and as much as they can about a specified topic in the area of curricula and instruction. In developing both tests, the researcher followed the procedures suggested by Bachman and Palmer (1996). Before the administration of both tests, their validity was established by four university teachers who reviewed them in light of the portions of the design statement.

Procedures

At the beginning of the experiment, the two groups were pretested on academic essay writing. Following pretesting, students in both groups were taught by the researcher, at the rate of one session per week. In the experimental group, students were randomly assigned to groups of four. In each session, each group member read a research paper or an article of interest to him/her in the area of curricula and instruction and then discussed what he/she read with other members of the group. S/he then wrote a summary or an abstract of what he/she read in his/her own words and read it loudly to other members of the group. In the control group, students were taught the academic writing subskills using the direct instruction approach. The study lasted for twelve weeks, one session per week. At the end of this period, all subjects were posttested on academic essay writing. After that, the pre- and posttests were scored by two independent raters.

Scoring

The quantity and quality of each essay were scored independently from each other. Quantity was measured, as Myers (1985, p. 75) suggested, by "a simple count of total words" in each essay, and quality was measured by counting the total number of words in error-free T-units (Robb, Ross, and Shortreed, 1986). Prior to scoring sessions, the two raters were trained in the use of these scoring methods. Interrater reliability was also established for both dependent variables. It was found to be 0.90 for quantity and 0.88 for quality. During scoring, essays with scores that differed by three or more points were read by a third rater and the extreme score was dropped. That is, the score for each essay was the average of two raters, either the first two raters, or in case in which a third rater was required, the average of the third rater and the closest score. To avoid scoring bias, the raters knew nothing about the nature of the study, and the subjects used identification numbers on their pre- and post-test essays. Furthermore, the raters made no marks on students' essays and recorded their scores on separate sheets.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The obtained data were analyzed using the t-test. The level of significance was set at the 0.05 level.

Pretest results

Table 1
The Difference in the Mean Scores between the Experimental Group and the Control Group on the Pretest

Group	N	Dependent Variables					
		Quantity			Quality		
		M	SD	T-value	M	SD	T-value
Experimental	32	63.97	<u>5.6</u>	0.92	36.8	7.3	0.73
Control	32	65.01	6.7		35.7	9.3	

As shown in Table 1, statistical analysis of the pretest data indicated that the two groups of the study did not differ significantly in the quantity or the quality of their writing prior to the beginning of the study ($t = 0.92$, $p > 0.05$; $t = 0.73$, $p > 0.05$, respectively). Therefore, the first hypothesis was accepted. This finding may be due to the fact that all subjects had not studied English for curricula and instruction purposes before the start of the study.

Posttest results

Table 2
The Difference in the Mean Scores between the Experimental Group and the Control Group on the Posttest

Group	N	Dependent Variables					
		Quantity			Quality		
		M	SD	T-value	M	SD	T-value
Experimental	32	99.67	<u>8.3</u>	11.75	40.5	9.6	2.98
Control	32	66.55	7.9		46.6	6.7	

As shown in Table 2, students in the experimental group scored significantly higher than those in the control group on the quantity of writing ($t = 11.75$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the second hypothesis was partially rejected. This finding suggests that the holistic approach is effective for improving the quantity of EAP students' writing and that overemphasis on accuracy alone does not lead to such an improvement. A possible explanation of this finding is that talking, reading and writing about authentic subject matter might give students ideas and data which could, in turn, help them to write in quantity. Another possible explanation is that students might know how to elaborate and develop their own thoughts through the reading of the whole texts they selected.

Results from the t-tests also indicated that students in the experimental group scored significantly lower than those in the control group on the quality of writing ($t = 2.98$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, the second hypothesis was completely rejected. This finding is due to the fact that the holistic approach focused on content rather than form. This suggests that focusing on content alone does not lead to the improvement of the quality of writing. As Hammerly (1991) states, "[F]luency does not lead to accuracy" (p. 10). On the other hand, this finding suggests that direct instruction in writing subskills leads to the improvement of the quality of writing. Support for this suggestion is provided by a considerable body of studies which obtained positive results with the segregated-skill approach. These studies revealed that: (1) Explicit story grammar instruction improved the quality of the narrative writing of average and below average students (e.g., EL-Koumy, 1999; Gambrell and Chasen, 1991; Leaman, 1993); (2) Explicit instruction in expository text structures had a positive effect on the quality of students' expository writing (e.g., Murray, 1993; Taylor and Beach, 1984; Witherell, 1994); (3) Explicit teaching of formal grammar improved the quality of students' writing (e.g., Govindasamy, 1995; Manley and Calk, 1997; Melendez, 1993; Neulieb and Brosnahan, 1987; Yeung, 1993); and (4) Direct teaching of sentence combining improved the quality of students' writing (e.g., Abdan, 1981; Cooper, 1981).

In light of the results of the study, the researcher suggests that a combination of both the holistic approach and the segregated-skill approach can boost students' writing above the levels that occur with either alone. This suggestion is consistent with Pressley's (1998) contention that

Excellent classrooms involve a balancing of whole language experiences (e.g., reading of real texts, composition) and skills instruction....There is a good reason to suspect that classrooms that are either extremely skills-oriented or extremely anti-skills oriented (i.e., skills instruction occurs on an as-needed basis only in the context of reading and writing) are not as effective as more balanced classrooms. (p. 286)

Experimental support of the same suggestion also comes from studies conducted by Nagle (1989) and Jones (1995). Nagle (1989) compared the stories written by students in first grade classes being taught by a holistic approach, a traditional approach, and a combination of both. She found that "the mean scores were consistently higher in classes with teachers that integrated the holistic and traditional teaching methods as compared to classes being taught in a more holistic or a more traditional setting" (p. 72). Jones (1995) compared the effects of an eclectic approach versus a whole-language approach on the writing of first grade students. She found that the eclectic approach resulted in statistically significant scores than the holistic approach.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study are limited to EAP students at the post-university level, the materials used for both treatments, and the operationalizations of the dependent and independent variables. Within these limitations, one can conclude that the holistic approach tends to complement the segregated-skill approach. Therefore, there must be a proper balance between the two approaches to teaching EAP writing in EFL classrooms.

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